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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: WHERE ARE THE DEMONSTRATORS?

REF: A. BEIRUT 0001
[1](#)B. PARIS 0112

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) Curiously, the much ballyhooed "anti-Paris III" labor protests that the March 8-Aoun opposition promised -- from Michel Aoun's front yard -- would shake the foundations of the Siniora government this week have fizzled. After two days of lackluster turn-out, the General Labor Confederation (with its pro-Syrian leadership) suspended temporarily what was announced as a progressive series of demonstrations, picketing each day a new GOL institution. What the sky-is-falling parts of the March 14 majority feared might result in ministry-by-ministry takeover by Hizballah and Aounist thugs has not come even remotely to pass. In addition, the number of participants in the "tent city" sit-in downtown seems to have stabilized at an underwhelming few score during weekdays and a slightly less unimpressive few thousand on weekends (with more showing up for scheduled speeches).

[1](#)2. (S) Relieved March 14 leaders credit these welcome developments to divisions within the labor movement itself (split like the rest of Lebanon along increasingly hostile confessional and political lines). "They have their unions, and we have ours," Marwan Hamadeh told the Ambassador. Some cite fatigue in non-Hizballah components of the opposition. In addition, Sunni-Shia tensions are seen as creating a red line, given fears that sectarian clashes could quickly spiral out of control (and expand beyond Lebanon) in this hyper-tense atmosphere. Hizballah, at the moment, seems unwilling to cross that line. Moreover, a public statement by LAF Commander Sleiman helped convince people that the LAF would not stand by idly if GOL institutions were attacked: no one relishes being blamed for either splitting the LAF or forcing it to fire upon demonstrators. We also find the reports of tactical differences among March 8-Aoun leaders to be credible: Michel Aoun, Suleiman Franjeh, and Talal Arslan seem eager for aggressive opposition assaults to topple the Siniora government quickly; Hizballah, Nabih Berri, and opposition Sunni figures like Omar Karami and Fathi Yaqin have firmly pressed on the brakes.

[1](#)3. (S) Certainly, all of these factors played a role in diminishing enthusiasm for the strikes, as did the surprising steadfastness of GOL leaders. So, one can reasonably ask, is the March 8-Aoun opposition movement losing momentum in the face of the unblinking Siniora cabinet and March 14 forces?

[1](#)4. (S) Unfortunately, we think that any predictions of a faltering opposition movement are premature. (We'd welcome

being proven wrong). The primary engine of the opposition is Hizballah. And it is the absence of Hizballah activists in this week's labor demonstrations that explains the modest turnouts. As we do not believe that Hizballah has suddenly lost the ability to mobilize its followers, Hizballah must have chosen not to do so. The perplexing question is why. Talking with the Ambassador, PM Siniora attributed Hizballah's decision not to activate its "street" to the Saudi-Hizballah contacts that climaxed in the 12/27 meeting between King Abdullah and Hizballah's Na'im Qassim and Mohammed Ra'ad (ref a). Hizballah, Siniora says, does not want to annoy Saudi Arabia, which street demonstrations and heightened Sunni-Shia tensions would do.

15. (S) In addition to the possible Saudi connection, we wonder if Hizballah leaders shifted their focus. Hizballah leaders like Qassim, along with the pro-Syrian media, have hinted ominously that UNIFIL should stick to what they insist is an extremely limited mandate. Editorials claim that the "old UNIFIL" (i.e., ineffective UNIFIL) is preferable to the UNIFIL created by UNSCR 1701. On top of ongoing lurid accounts of bad-boy behavior by UNIFIL soldiers, stories now circulate in the press about (non-existent) Hizballah-UNIFIL clashes. A storm of pro-Syrian criticism seems to have spooked the French UNIFIL contingent from deploying UAVs shipped to Lebanon. For once aiming their venom at the French rather than the U.S., pro-Syrian media and Hizballah's al-Manar have condemned French Ambassador Bernard Emie for the failure of Nabih Berri's last initiative (that surely not even Berri thought had a real chance of success) and for pushing UNIFIL to be overly aggressive. This takes place against the backdrop of a reported increase in arms smuggling from Syria to Hizballah weapons depots in the Biqa' Valley.

BEIRUT 00000066 002 OF 002

16. (S) All of these developments suggest to us that, for Hizballah, chipping away at UNSCR 1701 and defanging UNIFIL are higher tactical priorities for now than taking aggressive measures to overthrow Siniora's cabinet. Compared with besieging the Grand Serail, rhetorical (or even physical) attacks on UNIFIL are far less risky in terms of potential Sunni-Shia clashes: The Sunnis (thinly represented on the ground in the south) have little emotional investment in UNSCR 1701 or UNIFIL and are not likely to take to the streets to defend either. And the more ominous and frequent the anti-UNIFIL speeches by Hizballah, the more fearful UNIFIL contributing countries will be about the safety of their troops. It will be dismaying but not surprising if, as a result (and as Hizballah no doubt intends), UNIFIL patrols become more passive and less frequent. Hizballah can achieve some of its agenda without worrying about crossing the Sunni-Shia red lines.

17. (S) Yet if, as we suspect, Hizballah is now concentrating on incrementally rolling back UNSCR 1701, it does not come at the expense of Hizballah's other objectives. Indeed, threatening UNIFIL can help with other goals. The surprising French willingness (ref b) to allow a delay on establishing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (along with the apparent French allergy for Chapter VII for the tribunal) is undoubtedly linked to French fears for its UNIFIL troops. Attacking UNIFIL can also embarrass and further weaken the GOL, especially as Siniora is so closely associated with UNSCR 1701. In Beirut, a continuation of the stand-off between the opposition and GOL is not inimical to Hizballah's interests. After all, the opposition has succeeded in weakening the Siniora cabinet legally and politically by the Shia walk-out and the physical encirclement of the Grand Serail. Short of additional murders that would topple the cabinet, this situation can continue indefinitely and does not hurt Hizballah. Moreover, Hizballah is surely satisfied that momentum regarding the Special Tribunal for Lebanon indeed seems stalled, with no obvious way to move forward that will guarantee successful establishment of the tribunal.

18. (S) A Hizballah focus on UNIFIL and UNSCR 1701 does not mean that Hizballah is abandoning the use of demonstrations. Hizballah's firebrand allies like Michel Aoun, wanting to keep his supporters motivated, will certainly insist upon such shows of force. Hizballah will oblige sufficiently to maintain Aoun's Christian cover. Particularly in the lead-up to Paris III, we fully expect more demonstrations of varying sizes and in diverse locations in the coming days. We hear very mixed predictions about how strongly Hizballah and its allies will work to prevent the appearance of victory for Siniora's cabinet at Paris III. But -- however much this approach must frustrate Aoun -- Hizballah does not seem interested in using a single demonstration as the decisive blow against the Siniora cabinet. Hizballah, for whatever reason, seems willing to wait. (We would like to think that Hizballah's failure to turn out the crowds for the labor demonstrations that were announced to much fanfare on Monday would infuriate Aoun and make him think twice about the trustworthiness of his allies. But such a conclusion would demonstrate a level of introspection that we have not heretofore witnessed in the General.)

19. (S) Even if we are right about Hizballah's current focus, Hizballah's calculations will change depending on what the March 14 bloc does. Although little substantive dialogue passes between the two sides of Lebanon's political divide, each watches the other's moves carefully. Some March 14 leaders -- emboldened by the failure of the labor demonstrations this week -- propose that the majority carry through on its own threat to force open a parliamentary session under Deputy Speaker Farid Makkari (a Greek Orthodox member of Hariri's Mustaqbal bloc) to overcome Nabih Berri's foot-dragging. Just as the Sunnis would be outraged by a physical attack on the Prime Minister (always a Sunni), the Shia will see a parliamentary session not chaired by the Speaker (a Shia) as a declaration of war. Hizballah would be less willing in this case to rebuff Aoun's calls for overrunning the Grand Serail. Despite a less dramatic week politically than expected, we anticipate that Hizballah and its allies will maintain the possibility of using "the street" for weeks to come. Despite the respite felt by the March 14 bloc this week, a palpable sense of foreboding remains.

FELTMAN